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Editor's Notebook

This issue of *RDP* features a special section on telecommunications in rural areas. New telecommunications technology promises to better link rural and urban areas and, hopefully, to bring more jobs to rural areas as it allows greater flexibility in locating businesses. But rural areas also face obstacles in adopting the new technology, such as higher costs because of less dense settlement and outdated equipment that will have to be upgraded.

In August 1998, the Economic Research Service, TVA Rural Studies, and the Western Rural Development Center sponsored a workshop in Washington, DC, on rural telecommunications. Organized by Peter Stenberg of ERS and David Freshwater of TVA Rural Studies, the workshop presented papers on a number of topics pertinent to rural telecommunications. This *RDP* issue contains articles selected by Peter Stenberg from several people who gave papers at the workshop.

Communities that lack high-speed broadband connections may have to develop new strategies to attract greater investments in telecommunications. Kathleen McMahon and Priscilla Salant discuss strategic planning for telecommunications improvements, with particular attention to the experiences of communities in Wyoming and Colorado. Effective planning starts with a needs assessment survey and requires cooperation by public officials, businesses, and individual households.

Providing adequate health care has become more difficult in those rural communities losing population, and even growing areas have had trouble keeping up with the latest advances in medical care. Many small towns have lost their hospitals. Susan M. Capalbo and Christine N. Heggem look at two promising options, telemedicine and limited-service hospitals. Electronic connections between rural practitioners and larger hospitals and specialists are becoming so refined that even some diagnostic tests can be conducted over phone lines. Limited-service hospitals (such as critical-access hospitals) have permitted emergency, primary, and outpatient care to be offered in communities that have not had such care available or have lost it.

The needs of disabled people are often overlooked in rural telecommunications discussions. Proportionally, more disabled people live in rural than urban areas, yet facilities in rural areas are often less accessible than those in urban areas. Alexandra Enders and Tom Seekins examine the special problems of the disabled and recent legislation to ensure them equal access to telecommunications.

Another important group is the older population, especially those over 85. Carolyn C. Rogers shows how this most rapidly growing part of the population has characteristics with important policy implications—they are mainly women, often in poor health, often poor, and often live alone. As more people enter this group, policymakers will be increasingly challenged to fashion policies that take into account the particular needs of the oldest old.

The South as a whole has prospered in the 1990's. In rural areas, however, poverty, discrimination, and inadequate education continue to plague workers and dampen their prospects for a brighter future. As the article by Thomas D. Rowley and David Freshwater argues, many living in poverty are ill prepared to compete in today's globalized labor market and are even less prepared for the higher skill requirements of the future. More effective education and training programs coupled with better assistance in helping poor people find jobs are necessary if the problems of the rural southern labor force are to be overcome.

Finally, Patrick Commins, Karen S. Hamrick, Anicca C. Jansen, Kevin Murphy, and Peter L. Stenberg report on rural issues in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Visits by ERS economists to the island of Ireland and return visits by Irish researchers show that the Irish have much in common with the United States, including a restructured agricultural sector and rural outmigration. However, administration of rural development programs differs substantially from that of the United States.

Douglas E. Bowers

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